

VIDEO
NEWS■ NEXT-GENERATION
DVD WAR IS BACK ON

Any chance of finding a peaceful solution to the upcoming format war between HD-DVD and Blu-ray "would be extremely difficult at this stage", according to Yoshihide Fujii, who is Toshiba's representative at the negotiations to combine the two formats. The negotiations have been going on since April. This latest announcement is a setback for an industry that is trying to avoid a costly format war to mirror the Betamax v VHS battle of the 1980s. Technically speaking, Sony's Blu-ray has the upper hand at the moment, but HD-DVD has better support from movie studios and is likely to be launched before the end of 2005.

■ SONY UNLEASHES HD
CAMCORDERS

Sony is introducing the HDR-HC1E, a high-definition addition to its Handycam range. It will record in 1080i to standard mini DV tapes, giving a resolution of 1,920x1,080 interlaced, compared to the standard MiniDV resolution of 720x576 interlaced. Combined with an HD display device, this should give your films movie-like picture quality with a 16:9 aspect ratio.

If the rest of the design and usability is up to the usual Handycam standard, this camcorder should be a winner. We'll bring you a review in the autumn when it is available.

■ ATI TO DEMO HIGH-DEFINITION
VIDEO PLAYBACK

ATI was recently expected to give the first public demonstration of high-definition H.264 video playback with hardware acceleration on the PC platform. Using Radeon technology and a CyberLink video-player application, the demo was due to take place at the Computex show in Taipei, Taiwan in June. H.264 is the video compression standard to be used in next-generation high-definition video Blu-ray and HD-DVD players. It is designed to have up to three times the compression efficiency of MPEG-2, while improving overall image quality. ATI emphasises that this increased efficiency is highly computationally demanding, which is where its Radeon-based graphics hardware assistance comes in for the real-time decoding of high bit-rate video.

"Consumers are clamouring for the amazing visual quality that Blu-ray and HD-DVD will bring to PCs," announced Rick Bergman, senior VP of ATI's PC Business Unit. "ATI is transforming the PC video landscape by leading the industry adoption of Blu-ray and HD-DVD on the PC. This builds upon ATI's unrivalled video and display technologies."

REVIEW MEDIA PLAYER

FREECOM
Medioplayer-3

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £199 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.cclonline.comDETAILS www.freecom.com

Many people are building up massive libraries of media in their homes. In the good old days, this would have consisted of teetering piles of vinyl records, comic books in low, dust-covered mounds and endless unlabelled VHS cassettes that would deny any attempt at classification.

Thankfully in the new digital age we can all have embarrassingly huge and geeky collections of whatever we fancy, without upsetting those we live with. The computing industry has come up with several clever technologies to get these collections off our study-bound PCs and into our living rooms: media centre PCs, wireless home networking and DivX players to name a few.

Freecom's Medioplayer-3 approaches the problem from a simpler angle. It is a 160GB external hard disk that can play a range of common media files. First, you plug it into your PC and copy your media files to it. Then you carry it down to the living room and plug it into your TV or stereo to enjoy your movies, photos or audio files.

This is more straightforward than setting up a home network and using a device such as Pinnacle's Showcenter, though not nearly so slick and satisfying as having your media networked wirelessly around your house.

The Medioplayer has two other advantages. It gives you an extra 160GB of storage to fill, and you can take it on the road with you. There is also a choice of composite or S-video output for video, and optical S/PDIF or minijack out for audio. If you don't have S-video you can get an S-video-to-



SCART lead, which will be compatible with most TVs. The Medioplayer supports MPEG 1, 2 and 4 as well as DivX and Xvid formats, and comes with a full copy of Dr DivX so you can encode from DVDs. Even better, it supports DVD VOB files, so you can rip a DVD straight to the Medioplayer.

Video quality was fine through S-video; we watched several sequences from *Star Wars* encoded to DivX and played them back on a large LCD TV. But when handling audio files, you can't queue up one audio track while listening to another.

Freecom's Medioplayer is a decent way to get media off your PC and into your living room, especially if you need to take it further afield, or the idea of setting up a home network doesn't appeal.

Seth Barton

✓ Easy to use

✗ Can't queue up audio tracks

SPECIFICATIONS 160GB hard disk, USB Hi-Speed interface (cable not included), analogue/optical S/PDIF audio out (on shared minijack), supports MPEG4 (DivX), DVD (MPEG2), MPEG1, JPEG, MP3, WMA, OGG. Part code AVD0062

HOTLIST DIGITAL TV TUNER

NEBULA
ELECTRONICS
DigiTV USB

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £99 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Nebula Electronics 01689 897090

DETAILS www.nebula-electronics.com

Most TV cards have a reputation for being difficult to install and use, so it's a relief to find the DigiTV USB. Simple to install, it automatically locates all the digital channels and downloads a seven-day guide. Easy to program and full of clever features, this is the best digital TV tuner on the market.



SPECIFICATIONS RF input, MPEG2 recording, USB Hi-Speed interface. Part code DigiTV USB2

HOTLIST DIGITAL VIDEO CAMERA

PANASONIC
NV-GS75

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £395 inc VAT and delivery

SUPPLIER www.internetcamcordersdirect.comDETAILS www.panasonic.co.uk

Panasonic's NV-GS75 offers three CCDs at an affordable price. The technology gives the camera excellent picture quality and vivid colours. Only the 10x optical zoom seems a bit stingy compared to other models on the market.

Despite being lightweight and plastic, the NV-GS75 feels well made. The lack of a true 16:9 mode is the only big let-down on an otherwise excellent and affordable DV camera.



SPECIFICATIONS Mini DV camcorder, 3 CCD, 10x optical zoom, USB2 and FireWire interfaces. Part code NVGS75

REVIEW HDD/DVD RECORDER**LITE-ON
LVW-5045**

RATING ★★

PRICE £293 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.cclonline.comDETAILS www.liteonit.com

VHS is dying; the grave is dug and the headstone carved, and its successors are fighting over the spoils. VHS's victory over Betamax in the 1980s led to 20 years of undisputed domination in the home-recording market. Picture quality was poor, tapes got lost and recordings would invariably end before the program did. But then VHS was ousted by DVD, which claimed the movie retail and rental segments of the market. Home recording is challenged by two technologies, though: DVD recorders and hard disk drive (HDD) recorders. TV has become more complicated with digital and analogue transmission.

Into this maelstrom comes Lite-On's LVW-5045. The rather unattractive box is plastered with logos trumpeting its capabilities and compatibilities, and it certainly does contain a lot of kit. It's not a bad piece of equipment, but there are underlying problems with the choice of technologies here.

A 160GB hard disk is the main draw, giving 33 to 198 hours of recording. This is dependent on which of the five different quality settings you use. The LP setting gave acceptable results and 99 hours of recording time, enough to cover your summer holiday. A DVD+/-RW drive lets you archive programs from the hard disk to whichever media you like, so you can keep the recordings you want.

There is plenty of connectivity too, with two SCART sockets and component output, plus RF, S-video, composite and stereo phono sockets. DVD playback is passable but not outstanding, though the provision of a progressive component out is a bonus to those with a compatible screen.

However, there are some serious problems with the LVW-5045. The menu and remote elicited frustration from everyone who used them. We also found the setup function to be particularly tiresome. It lacks the usability and slickness of other manufacturers' models.

More damning is the use of an analogue tuner. Anyone who cares enough about TV to spend £300 on the Lite-On has probably already spent £50 on a Freeview box. If you are enjoying the more consistent picture quality and increased number of channels available from digital broadcast, going back to an analogue signal is not an option.

The VHS market is currently being replaced by two clearly defined options: a single analogue tuner with HDD and DVD recording, or a Freeview box with dual digital tuners, integrated HDD and electronic programme guide, but no disc backup facility. We know where we'd spend our £300, and it wouldn't be on an analogue device.

Seth Barton

 Lots of functions

 No digital tuner; confusing menu system

SPECIFICATIONS HDD DVD+/-RW recorder, 160GB hard disk, single analogue tuner, two SCART, component out, phono in/out, RF in/out, composite in/out, coaxial S/PDIF out, optical S/PDIF out.

HOTLIST DIGITAL VIDEO CAMERA**CANON
MVX10i**

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £549 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.askdirect.co.ukDETAILS www.canon.co.uk

Canon's Digic processing system gives this DV camera excellent image quality. There's little digital noise, and an effective image stabiliser removes all but the worst wobbles. The MVX10i is well made and easy to handle, with an easy-to-use menu. A maximum 1,632x1,224 still image resolution and a superb TFT screen complete the package; the only thing missing is a manual focus ring.



SPECIFICATIONS Mini DV cassette, 10x optical zoom, USB and FireWire interfaces. Part code 9049A007AA

HOTLIST DVD AUTHORIZING SOFTWARE**ULEAD
DVD MovieFactory 4**

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £25 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.ulead.co.uk

DVD MovieFactory is still the best choice for anyone who wants to perform DVD authoring on the cheap. Its menu design is comprehensive and easy to use, and its set-top recorder compatibility, direct tape-to-disc burning and editing of pre-recorded discs are all welcome for this very reasonable price.



REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or later, Pentium III 800MHz processor, 128MB RAM (512MB recommended), 950MB disk space plus 5GB for video

CHOOSING A... DV CAMERA


Step-by-step guide to buying the ideal digital video camera

1 If you just want to make home movies, a £250 digital video (DV) camera with the specs shown below will be fine. A range of auto-exposure modes will ensure you get decent results in all conditions. The LCD screen provides easy playback on location, while the remote allows for comfortable viewing on the sofa. If you'll be using the zoom a lot, concentrate on the optical zoom spec, as the digital zoom's effective range depends on this.

2 If you want to edit video, get a model with DV-in. You can then transfer edited footage back to MiniDV tape and run off VHS copies via the camera's S-video out. Cameras with S-video in can often be used to capture analogue video too.

3 Enthusiasts will pay for a more flexible camera. A good manual focus and colour viewfinder will make for better camerawork, an external microphone will transform your audio, and good battery and charger options will keep you filming for longer. A high-resolution CCD might improve video quality, but while this and a flash memory slot will make your DV camera double as a digital camera, quality will be basic.

4 Miniature DV cameras, especially those using the tiny MicroMV tapes, may tempt gadget-lovers, but picture quality may be compromised. Models with fancy on-camera editing are a waste of money; that's what your PC is for.

5 If you're serious about film-making, £1,500 buys you a DV camera with superb optics, three CCDs and the requisite connectors to attach equally expensive professional AV accessories.

FILL IN YOUR SPECS HERE

(Recommended minimum in grey)

CCD: 400,000 pixels

ZOOM: 10x optical/300x digital

VIDEO PORTS:

FireWire out, S-video out

MONITORING: Mono viewfinder, 2.5" colour LCD

MEDIA: MiniDV tape

STILLS CAPTURE: 640x480 to tape

EXTRAS: Remote control